The Helm's National Gymnastic Hall of Fame was organized as the first recognition of athletes, coaches and contributors in the sport of gymnastics. It began in 1957-1958 with the initial class being inducted in 1959. Selections today are made annually from the disciplines governed by USA Gymnastics. The Hall has evolved through the years and made a formal transition into the USA Gymnastics Hall of Fame in 1995. We examine here the evolution of the Hall of Fame.

Prior to the founding of the Hall, Frank Cumiskey, an American gymnastics legend, wrote in 1948, “If we had a Hall of Fame for gymnasts, this name would surely be included - Frank Haubold.” Both Haubold and Cumiskey were original honorees. In 1954, Dr. E. A. Eklund, long affiliated with the American Turners, wrote to Roy E. Moore, then Chairman of the AAU Gymnastic Committee, proposing an annual election to a “Gymnastics Hall of Fame.” No action was taken, however.

When Mr. Moore died in 1957, a number of people wrote memorials in his honor. He was considered the modern “Father” of gymnastics in the United States serving as our first Olympic coach and first representative to the FIG. He gave a half century of service to the sport. The “Moore” element on the pommel horse is named for him and he was a five times national champion on the side horse (as it was then known), between 1908 and 1913. Gene Wettstone of Penn State fame wrote, “The Spirit of Roy E. Moore will live forever.” Because his passing caused others to seek a proper honor for him, Moore might well be considered the first Hall of Fame honoree.

As President of the National Association of American Gymnastics Coaches (NAAGC), George Szypula of Michigan State University, was also searching for some way to preserve Moore’s legacy. Following Moore’s death, Szypula wrote to Bill Schroeder, Director of the Helms Athletic Foundation in Los Angeles, to inquire whether or not Moore could be recognized in some way by the Helms organization. Schroeder, who had a hand in the development of a number of sports Halls of Fame, responded immediately, “We have no Hall of Fame for gymnastics ... would you like to start one?” Paul H. Helms, a Los Angeles baker, established the Helms Foundation shortly after the 1932 Olympics. His new organization would recognize the many unsung athletes in Olympic sports such as swimming, track and field and wrestling. Gymnastics more than met Helm’s criteria since it had been contested from the very first Olympics in Athens but was not well known in the United States at that time.

Szypula presented the Hall of Fame idea at the next meeting of the NAAGC and received approval to go ahead with the project. He organized a Selection Committee of prominent gymnastics personalities: George Cameron (Southern California), E. A. Eklund (American Turners), George Gulack (AAU), Newt Loken (University of Michigan), Charlie Pond (University of Illinois), Hartley Price (Florida State University) and Gene Wettstone (Penn State). The Committee searched for a suitable venue for the induction of the first group of honorees. The Pan Am Games were scheduled for Chicago in 1959 and that event suited their purposes. It was decided that there should be 10 gymnasts and 10 coaches, all men, honored during the Games. Their names are found on the list accompanying this article.

Szypula led the selection committee for 35 years.

America’s first female all-around champion (1931) was Roberta Ranck Bonniwell, the “Babe” Didrikson of Philadelphia. She was the first American woman to coach an Olympic team (1952). She was prominent in a number of other sports winning the first national javelin title for women in track and field. She wrote to Bill Schroeder of the Helms Foundation after noting that in the decade following the first induction of men to the Hall of Fame, no women had been nominated. She made a good point since a number of her “girls” had won prominence in gymnastics, setting records for women that have yet to be broken. For example:

1. Clara Schroth: Bronze Team medal 1948 Olympic Team, 11 consecutive national balance beam titles, 39 national titles during her career.

2. Pearl Perkins: national all-around champion three times

3. Marion Twining: Bronze Team medal 1948 Olympic Team

Schroeder directed Bonniwell to contact Szypula. As a result, a women’s sub-committee was formed by none other than Jackie Fie under Szypula’s direction and the first class of female honorees was elected in 1974 at the National Collegiate Invitational organized by Herb Vogel at Southern Illinois University (See listing).
was not elected to the Hall of Fame until 1988. Committee notes reveal that she had not submitted a resumé for the initial induction and in the interim was disabled by a long term chronic disease and died. The Committee corrected this obvious error years later. Bruce Frederick succeeded Szypula as Chairman in 1993.

Prior to 1979, an additional sponsor of Citizens Savings bank began to help the Hall of Fame. Noting that the annual nomination and election of honorees was not all it could be, Frederick suggested that another sponsor be located. The men’s coaches’ organization had become the National Association of Collegiate Gymnastics Coaches. The NACGC had no resources to properly induct its honorees. The Amateur Athletic Association of Los Angeles, which established a museum and library to house the Helms collection, continued to supply scrolls for the Hall of Fame honorees each year but abandoned the issuance of an annual press release and contributed little else. Discussions ensued with USA Gymnastics about responsibility for the National Hall of Fame and the NACGC approved it in 1994.

Kathy Scanlan, then President of USA Gymnastics, wrote to the Selection Committee accepting responsibility for the program promising that honorees elected in the future and all of those elected in the past would receive the following benefits:

1. New Hall of Fame honorees would receive full accommodation to Congress (travel and housing) and would be honored in a public ceremony.

2. Former honorees would have Congress fees waved, could apply for complimentary tickets to each of the various events USA Gymnastics organizes and were conferred emeritus status and given membership in USA Gymnastics for life.

On August 27, 1994, the first “Ceremony of Honors” inclusive of a Hall of Fame induction ceremony was conducted at the National Congress in Nashville, Tenn. The specific proposal governing the USA Gymnastics Hall of Fame Selection Committee, the requirements for nominations by the gymnastics community, and the benefits that all living Hall of Fame members would receive was written by a transition committee chaired by Kathy Scanlon. This proposal was accepted by the USA Gymnastics Board of directors and formally adopted by USA Gymnastics in 1995. The first class of inductees elected under the new program was honored in 1996. The Selection Committee was subsequently reorganized retaining a simple majority of members from the former NACGC Committee. Carolyn Bowers was elected Chair and continues to serve in that capacity at this writing.

The Hall of Fame Selection Committee is a sub-committee of the Awards and Recognition Committee. It is comprised of seven members who are selected from all interested applicants by the A&R committee. Members serve four-year terms. The committee meets annually to select the new class for induction into the Hall of Fame from new nominations and from the credentials carried over in file. Each new class may consist of a maximum of seven inductees with a coaching team or a competitive team consisting as one. Athletes only are considered in the first round of closed balloting. Any remaining openings in the class of seven may then include consideration of nominated coaches or contributors.

Since 1995, the selection committee has worked with USA Gymnastics to host a separate Hall of Fame awards ceremony at the National Congress. The committee designed a Hall of Fame logo and appropriate certificate as well as a lapel pin to be presented during the induction ceremony. USA Gymnastics added a medallion for the inductees to wear during Congress and accompanying competition for recognition by the gymnastics community.

Additionally, the committee reviews all ideas presented to them with review of gymnastics history. The committee strives to elect candidates of exceptional qualification by consideration of each completed nomination, attempts to seek additional information to complete or strengthen the requirements for consideration, and continues to maintain the credential file of all worthy nominations.

To date, 237 individuals and two teams, the first Olympic Gold medal teams for men and women, 1984 and 1996 respectively, have been elected to the Hall of Fame since 1959. There are 134 athletes featured along with 96 coaches and 88 contributors. Note that the total is more than 237 since some of the honorees have been honored for their individual accomplishments in different categories or have been a member of an honored team.